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FIRST-GRADERS' RESPONSES TO THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT READING.

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THE RESPONSES OF FIRST GRADERS TO THREE QUESTIONS ABOUT READING ARE REPORTED. SUBJECTS, 111 PUPILS IN FIVE 1ST-GRADE CLASSROOMS IN THREE SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN INDIANA AND MICHIGAN, WERE INTERVIEWED AND THEIR RESPONSES WERE ANALYZED AND CLASSIFIED INTO LOGICAL CATEGORIES. WHEN ASKED IF THEY WANTED TO LEARN TO READ, A NEGATIVE ANSWER WAS GIVEN BY FOUR CHILDREN. IN ANSWERING WHY THEY WANTED TO READ, THE FOLLOWING REASONS WERE OFFERED--(1) 30 PUPILS, ONE-FOURTH OF THE CHILDREN, GAVE VAGUE AND MEANINGLESS REASONS, (2) 27 CHILDREN WANTED TO LEARN AS A MEANS TO A GOAL, (3) 37 WANTED TO LEARN TO READ TO THEMSELVES OR TO OTHERS, (4) 10 WANTED TO LEARN BECAUSE THERE WAS SOME FEELING OF VALUE CONNECTED WITH SUCH LEARNING, AND (5) 11 PUPILS IDENTIFIED THEMSELVES WITH A READER. WHEN ASKED WHAT THEY HAD TO DO TO LEARN TO READ IN THE FIRST GRADE, THESE IDEAS WERE ADVANCED--(1) 38 PUPILS DIDN'T KNOWN, (2) TWO-FIFTHS OF THE REMAINING RESPONSES INDICATED THAT A PASSIVE TYPE OF OBEDIENCE WAS REQUIRED, (3) TWO-FIFTHS OF THE CHILDREN SAW THEMSELVES TAKING SOME ACTION IN LEARNING, AND (4) ONE-FIFTH OF THE CHILDREN THOUGHT THE TEACHER WOULD SHOW THEM HOW TO READ. DIFFERENCES IN ANSWERS RELATED TO SEX, RACE, AND FAMILY INCOME ARE DISCUSSED. REFERENCES AND TABLES ARE INCLUDED. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN THE "ELEMENTARY SCHOOL JOURNAL," VOLUME 66, MAY 1966. (MD)

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First-Graders' Responses to Three Questions About Reading

First-grade teachers know that most children come to school wanting to learn how to read. But why do children want to learn to read? Do their reasons have any meaning for the teaching of reading?

What ideas do children have about how one learns to read? Children's expectations may be extremely varied and may influence their learning. Moreover, their expectations may be related to their socioeconomic background. Information on what children think they must do to learn to read could help competent kindergarten and first-grade teachers plan better learning experiences for pupils—experiences that would help children meet some of the problems involved in learning to read, experiences that would help children understand some of the reasons for certain procedures and some of the uses for reading.

This is a report on the responses beginning first-graders made to three questions: Do you want to learn how to read? Why? What must you do to learn how to read in first grade? The questions and the findings reported here are part of a larger study by the authors.

The 111 subjects in the study included all the pupils in five first-grade classrooms in three school systems for whom complete data were available.

The children in two classrooms—Groups 1 and 2—attended a rural school in central Indiana. These children, who had had no kindergarten experience, were treated as one class in the analysis. These two groups had thirty-eight children for whom we had all data for the larger study.

The children in two other classrooms—Groups 3 and 4—lived in a large industrial city in Michigan. The twenty-four children in Group 3 came from a largely middle-class area. The twenty-seven pupils in Group 4 came from a lower-middle- to an upper-lower-class environment.

Data for Group 5 came from twenty-two Negro children who lived in a suburb of Detroit. Some of the parents

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of the children in this group were engaged in the professions; others received Aid to Dependent Children.

Each child in the study was interviewed, and the interviews were recorded on tape. The children's responses were then analyzed and classified into logical categories.

Each investigator classified the responses independently. There was a 90 per cent level of agreement between the investigators in the assignment of responses to the empirically derived categories. An independent judge who also classified the responses achieved an .82 level of agreement with the authors' classification.

If a child's response had two distinct elements, it was placed in two categories. This procedure explains the difference in the total number of responses in the tables.

The researchers made an over-all analysis of the responses to the questions, compared the responses of boys with the responses of girls, and made other comparisons within and among classrooms.

The children's responses to the questions "Do you want to learn how to read? Why?" were classified in seven categories.

Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response or an "I don't know" response.

Category 2: Vague, irrelevant, or circular response, such as, "Because I never did before," "I just want to," "I like to."

These two categories were treated as one because they gave no information or very limited information.

Category 3: Intrinsic: perform the act.

The responses in this category indicated that the children wanted to learn to read to be able to do so for themselves or for someone else. The category includes such replies as "So I can be looking in my books and reading them," "So I can read to my cousin," "So I can read some letters if I get any and I can read books."

Category 4: Goal-seeking responses.

In these responses the children were saying that they wanted to read "To pass in school," "To go to college," "I like to know what's going to happen," "So I can be smart." Essentially, reading was seen as a means to some goal.

Category 5: Affective-valuational responses.

In these responses the children were placing a valuational emphasis on why they wanted to learn how to read. This category included such responses as "It's good," "It's fun," or "It's best to."

Category 6: Identification.

Responses in this category included elements of identification with a parent, an older sibling, or some other individual who was reading. Among the responses placed in this category were "So I can be grown like my sister," "Because I want to read letters like my mom," "My big sister reads some books."

Category 7: Negative. This category

was for the responses of children who did not want to learn to read.

Table 1 summarizes the responses to the questions "Do you want to learn how to read? Why?" and indicates the per cent of the total group that responded in a given category. In addition, the per cent of responses placed in Categories 3 through 7 are listed separately. Categories 1 and 2 have been combined.

In all there were 119 responses to the questions. Thirty responses, or 25 per cent of the 119 responses, were placed in Categories 1 and 2, No Response or Don't Know and Vague.

The per cents reported for Categories 3 through 7 are based on the eighty-nine remaining meaningful responses.

Of the eighty-nine meaningful responses, 42 per cent were classified in Category 3, Intrinsic: Perform the Act; 31 per cent were classified in Category 4, Goal-seeking; 11 per cent were classified in Category 5, Affective-valuational; 12 per cent were placed in Category 6, Identification.

TABLE 1. *Distribution of responses to the question "Do you want to learn to read? Why?"*

Groups	Categories 1 and 2 No response Don't know Vague	Category 3 Intrinsic	Category 4 Goal-seeking	Category 5 Affective-valuational	Category 6 Identification	Category 7 Negative	Total
Groups 1 and 2							
Number of Responses	17	13	9	2	2	1	42
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–7)	36	31	21	5	5	2	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–7)		48	33	8	8	3	
Group 3							
Number of Responses	6	11	4	4	3	0	28
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–7)	21	40	14	14	11	0	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–7)		50	18	18	14	0	
Group 4							
Number of Responses	6	8	6	3	2	2	27
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–7)	22	30	23	11	7	7	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–7)		38	28	14	10	10	
Group 5							
Number of Responses	3	5	8	1	4	1	22
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–7)	14	23	36	5	18	5	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–7)		26	43	5	21	5	
Total							
Number of Responses	30	37	27	10	11	4	119
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–7)	25	31	23	9	9	3	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–7)		42	31	11	12	4	

Four children—one boy and three girls—responded negatively to our first question, "Do you want to learn how to read?" Their replies, which were placed in Category 7, made up 4 per cent of our eighty-nine meaningful responses.

The responses made by the boys were not significantly different from the responses made by the girls. The only notable difference was found in Categories 1 and 2, for no responses or "I don't know" responses and vague responses. Of the fifty-five responses from boys, 31 per cent (from seventeen boys) were placed in this category. Of the girls' responses, only 21 per cent (from thirteen girls) were classified in this category.

To sum up, thirty pupils, or about a fourth of the children, gave no reason or an extremely vague and meaningless reason for wanting to learn to read. Of the children who responded in a meaningful fashion, thirty-seven replied that they wanted to learn to read so that they could read for themselves or to someone else, twenty-seven wanted to learn to read as a means to a goal, ten wanted to learn to read because there was some feeling or value connected with such learning, eleven pupils identified with someone who was a reader, and four children indicated that they did not want to learn to read.

Individual classrooms showed some striking patterns. Thirty-six per cent of the pupils in the two groups that had not attended kindergarten could give no meaningful reply to the question on why one learns to read, but the pattern of meaningful responses from these two groups was consistent with the pattern from the total group. The pattern of responses from Group 4, which was made up primarily of lower-middle- and upper-lower-class children, did not differ from the pattern of the total group. Groups 3 and 5 showed differences on responses in Category 4, Goal seeking. Group 3, which was made up of middle-class Caucasian children, had a far smaller per cent (18 per cent) of responses in Category 4 than any other group did; while the highest per cent (43 per cent) of responses in Category 4 came from the all-Negro group. Half of the meaningful responses of the children in Group 3 fell under Category 3, Intrinsic: Perform the Act. About a fourth (26 per cent) of the responses of Group 5 were in this category.

Responses to the question, "What do you have to do to learn how to read in first grade?" were classified in five categories: No Response or Don't Know, Vague, Obedience-oriented, Other-directed, and Self-directed. Table 2 summarizes the responses to this question.

Of the 111 responses, thirty-eight responses, or 34 per cent, were either "I don't know" responses or vague replies and fell in Categories 1 and 2 (again treated as one category in our discussion). The remaining seventy-three responses were assigned to one of the three other categories: Obedience-oriented, Other-directed, and Self-directed.

Thirty replies were grouped as Obedience-oriented, the third category. Examples include: "Do what the teacher says"; "Mind the teacher"; "Listen to the teacher." These thirty responses made up 41 per cent of the seventy-three replies that expressed some meaningful notion of what the child would do to learn to read.

In the fourth category, for other-directed responses, pupils indicated that they would be taught by someone who would tell them how to read or they described the teaching act in some fashion: "Teacher will show us how"; "Teacher will tell us"; "She will point to a word and say it, and we will say it after her." This category differs from Obedience-oriented in that the teacher or some other adult is taking an active part in the teaching; in the obedience response the child is passive: he makes no mention of someone who is actively teaching, nor does he give a description of how the teaching is done. Sixteen responses, 22 per cent of the meaningful replies, were classified in this category.

The fifth category, labeled "Self-directed," contained responses from twenty-seven children, or 37 per cent of the meaningful responses. The self-directed response stated the necessity of the child's assuming some responsi-

TABLE 2. *Distribution of responses to the question "What do you have to do to learn to read in first grade?"*

Groups	Categories 1 and 2: No response, Don't know, Vague	Category 3: Obedience-oriented	Category 4: Other-directed	Category 5: Self-directed	Total
Groups 1 and 2					
Number of Responses	20	7	3	8	38
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–5)	53	18	8	21	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–5)		39	17	44	
Group 3					
Number of Responses	4	8	5	7	24
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–5)	17	33	21	29	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–5)		40	25	35	
Group 4					
Number of Responses	9	7	4	7	27
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–5)	33	26	15	26	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–5)		39	22	39	
Group 5					
Number of Responses	5	8	4	5	22
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–5)	23	36	18	23	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–5)		47	24	29	
Total					
Number of Responses	38	30	16	27	111
Per Cent of All Responses (Categories 1–5)	34	27	15	24	
Per Cent of Meaningful Responses (Categories 3–5)		41	22	37	

bility in learning to read. Examples: "Read to myself"; "Guess the words in the book"; "Look at pages, books, pictures."

In summary, slightly more than a third of all the responses given offered no meaningful explanation of what one must do to learn to read. Of the remaining responses, two-fifths indicated that a passive type of obedience was required to learn to read; slightly more than a fifth conveyed the notion that the teacher or someone else would show them how to read or gave some description of what the teacher would do in teaching reading; and less than two-fifths, 37 per cent, were responses in which children saw themselves as taking some action in learning to read.

The two groups that had had no kindergarten experience showed a distinct response pattern. Of the thirty-eight children in these two classrooms, 53 per cent, or twenty children, made a response that was classified in Categories 1 and 2, No Response or Don't Know and Vague. Group 4 again followed almost exactly the distribution of the total group. A relatively small number of Groups 3 and 5 made responses that were classified in Categories 1 and 2. Their other response patterns did not differ greatly from those of the total group.

Sex-related patterns of responses appear to be associated with the socio-economic dimensions of the groups. The only notable difference in the responses of boys and girls appears in Category 3, for obedience-oriented responses. Of the total number of boys who made responses that fell in Categories 3, 4, or 5, seventeen boys (46 per cent) replied with an obedience-oriented response, while thirteen girls (36 per cent) gave obedience-oriented responses.

A comparison was made of children whose responses fell in Categories 1 and 2 on both categorized questions. Only ten children made no response or a vague, meaningless response to both categorized questions. Thus, forty-eight children replied with either an "I don't know" or with vague, meaningless terms to one question but not to both questions. We interpret these results to mean that the children interviewed were trying to give a thoughtful response, but without success. Indeed, with both categorized questions, there were fewer "I don't know" answers than vague, circular, or irrelevant answers. "I don't know" responses and vague responses are considered actual responses, not artifacts of the testing situation.

Because of the limitations of sampling procedures and the limitations of the study in general, we approach interpretation cautiously and suggest the reader do likewise.

The first and most striking observation has to do with the per cent of responses in Category 1 and Category 2 by the children who had not attended kindergarten. The proportion of these children who gave no response, an "I don't know" response or a vague, meaningless reply was far higher than that in any of the other groups. Although we cannot ascribe a causal in-

fluence to kindergarten experience, it would appear that kindergarten may help children understand what is expected in school ("What must you do to learn how to read in first grade?") as well as help develop some purpose for learning to read ("Why do you want to learn how to read"?).

It is worth noting that a fourth of all these entering first-graders could express no logical, meaningful purpose for learning to read and a third of the children had no idea how it was to be accomplished. The need for helping pupils see a reason for learning to read and for gaining some insight into how it is going to be accomplished becomes apparent. Most research on learning supports the proposition that it helps the child to learn if he knows the reason for a learning situation and sees a purpose in a task. Inasmuch as reading is not nonsense learning, but a complex mental process, it may be important to identify it as such and to help beginners establish purposes for wanting to learn to read. It also becomes important to find out whether expressed motivations have any effect on later achievement in learning to read. Our partial analysis of data raises a crucial question we hope to pursue in our larger study (1).

We stress the fact that the proportion of obedience-oriented responses was comparatively constant and high in all our groups. Possibly this response shows the influence of homes that view obedience as most important in achieving success in school in general and in reading in particular. An almost equal per cent of pupils see some action on their part, however vague the action, as essential to learning to read.

Again, questions need to be asked. Is the understanding that one must take some responsibility for learning to read important to later achievement? Or is the idea that one learns to read by being obedient the more important one for children to hold, since it is rewarded in many ways? Do the children who express obedience-oriented concepts of how reading is learned, themselves act on this concept?

Almost three-fourths of the meaningful responses to the question "Why do you want to learn how to read?" fell into two categories: Intrinsic: Perform the Act or Goal-seeking ("pass in school," "become smart"). The fact that 42 per cent of these categorizable responses fell into Category 3 seems gratifying to us: children want to learn to read so that they can do something with reading. We wonder whether children who express an identification motive for wanting to learn to read see reading as a way of growing up.

Group 5, our all-Negro sample, had the highest proportion of goal-seeking responses to the question "Why do you want to learn how to read?" That is, Group 5 accounted for proportionately more of the "So I can pass into second grade," "So I can be smart" type of response than any other group did. Group 5 also had smaller proportions of responses in Categories 1 and

2 on both questions. When asked "What do you have to do to learn how to read in first grade?" pupils in Group 5 made a higher proportion of responses that fell in the obedience-oriented category. Do children in this racial subculture see reading as a means of achieving an immediate goal such as passing in school? Do they feel that one achieves this goal by submissive behavior? Our results do not give us the answer: they only raise the question.

For the second question "What do you have to do to learn how to read in first grade?" Group 3, the children from a middle-class milieu, had a proportionately smaller number of responses in Categories 1 and 2 than the other groups did. Possibly these pupils are more knowledgeable about what school is like and what is expected of them. Also, a relatively high proportion of their responses to the question: "Why do you want to learn to read?" fell in the Category 3, Intrinsic: Perform the Act. These children have probably been exposed to reading more than the others and have seen it used in a variety of situations. Pupils in Group 5 had a proportionately small number of responses in Category 3. The responses may reflect some lack of experience in seeing reading situations at home.

A higher proportion of boys than girls could not express a reason for wanting to learn how to read. The fact does not surprise us. But it does surprise us that more boys gave an obedience-oriented response to the pupils' responsibilities in learning to read. As previously stated, both findings are confounded by socioeconomic, racial, urban rural, and school-related experiences. Most of the boys who gave an "I don't know" or a meaningless response to the question "Why do you want to learn to read?" had not attended kindergarten. Most of the boys who gave an obedience-oriented response to the question "What must you do to learn how to read?" were in the all-Negro group. We do not have enough information to interpret these differences.

The findings of this analysis prompt still other questions that we are examining in a longitudinal study.

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1. Terry Denny and Samuel Weintraub. "Exploring First Graders' Concepts of Reading," *Reading Teacher*, XVI (March, 1963), 363–65.